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# **Selling the object of strategy: How frontline workers realize strategy through their daily work**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how frontline workers contribute to an organization's realized strategy. Using a workplace studies approach, we analyse the work of museum tour guides as a salient example of workers engaged in frontline work. Our findings demonstrate the subtle and intricate nature of the embodied work of frontline workers as they 'bring into being' the strategic aims of an organization. We identified five things as central to this process: (1) the situated physical context; (2) audience composition; (3) the moral order; (4) the talk, actions and gestures of the guide; and (5) the corresponding talk, actions and gestures of the audience. Drawing on these categories, we find frontline workers to demonstrate 'interactional competence': assessing and making use of the physical, spatial and material specifics of the context and those they are interacting with, and enlisting interactional resources to uphold a moral order that brings these others in as a working audience, encouraging them to respond in particular ways. Frontline workers thus skilfully combine language, material and bodily expressions in the flow of their work. Demonstrating these dynamics gives a more central role to material in the realization of strategy than previously recognized; demonstrates that 'outsiders' have an important part to play in realizing strategy; and highlights the importance of frontline workers and their skilled work in bringing strategy into being

## **Keywords**

Realizing strategy, frontline workers, materiality, interactional competence



## Introduction

The question of how strategies are realized in practice has fascinated strategy scholars ever since Mintzberg's (1978) seminal work introduced a distinction between realized and intended strategies. This distinction suggests that strategies may evolve independently from any intent and, thus, must be understood in terms of discernible patterns in action over time (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Indeed, organizational success and failure depend on these paths of action (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Yet, despite its relevance to organizations, little work has taken seriously the focus on how strategy is realized and, consequently, there are renewed calls for strategy scholars to examine the processes by which strategies become realized (Tsoukas, 2010; Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

Taking seriously the notion of realized strategy has important implications. First, it suggests that the micro-activities and practices that people engage in as part of their everyday work are central to understanding strategy (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere & Vaara, 2014; Whittington, 2006) and thus invites study of the dynamic activities enacted by individuals (Balogun & Floyd, 2010; Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*). Second, it extends the definition of strategists beyond the top management team (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007), introducing the role of others into the strategy process. Third, it suggests that realized strategy is critically affected by the material issues of context (Dameron, Lê & LeBaron, 2015) and human interaction (Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*).

In response, a steady stream of work has begun to focus on the micro-activities that constitute the actual doing of strategy and the embedded nature of human agency (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). However, despite a declared interest in the breadth of strategic practice, in challenging how and where it occurs, and in emphasizing the role of contextual and interactional features (see for example, Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Mantere, 2005 & 2014; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014; Whittington, 2004), research has largely continued to look for, and find, strategic practice, practitioners and their practices in settings which are very easily classified as strategic, exploring the role of top managers and consultants, strategy meetings, large scale change initiatives, and strategy away days (see for example, Samra-Fredericks, 2004; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Johnson, Prasantham, Floyd & Bourque, 2010; Sturdy, Schwarz & Spicer, 2006). Consequently, little research has focused on the daily embodied and interactive work of others that bring into being the strategic aims of an organization to realize strategy. Thus, our concern in this paper is to explore how non-managerial workers contribute to an organization's realized strategy.

We focus on frontline workers, building on a number of influential studies which suggest that these workers have important roles to play in realizing strategy (Ambrosini, Burton-Taylor & Bowman, 2007; Kaplan & Norton, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Frei & Morriss, 2012; Rouleau 2005). In addition, we build on work conducted as part of the material turn in strategy and organization studies (Lê & Spee, *forthcoming*), which urges us to pay greater attention to physical contextual features like built spaces, objects and artifacts (see also Jarzabkowski, Burke & Spee, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Spee & Smets 2013). Indeed, it has been argued that “materiality lies at the heart of strategy work” (Dameron et al., 2015: P8; see also Balogun et al, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and there is evidence that this is particularly true for frontline workers. For instance, Rouleau (2005) powerfully demonstrates the centrality of objects to strategy in her study of a fashion house. Studying frontline workers, she shows how clothes are used to encourage customers to connect with the production function of the organization – clothing design – which is an integral part of its strategy and central to its success. In organizations like these, objects encapsulate the core purpose of the organization, making materiality an important part of how strategy is realized.

However, capturing the contributions of non-managerial staff to strategy work and the development of realized strategy does not easily lend itself to study as they are not present in the events, occasions or locations typically associated with and studied in relation to strategic work, such as senior team meetings or strategy away days. To access theoretical and empirical resources to study these workers, the material aspects of their work and their contribution to realizing strategy, we thus draw on workplace studies (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Luff, Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000; Heath & Luff, 2007). By directing focus to diverse organizational arenas and demonstrating the impact that even seemingly insignificant actions by lower level employees can have on organizations (Luff et al, 2000; Heath & Luff, 2007), workplace studies pushes us to look to non-traditional arenas of ‘strategy work’. It provides the means to study the embedded and embodied nature of work by considering specific individual and contextual circumstances in light of the rules, practices and obligations routinely demonstrated in such work. Micro-sociological analyses of real-time interaction are used to study normal, ‘mundane’ work. Applied to strategy work (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Balogun et al., 2014), this provides an approach through which to uncover how, in the course of routine work, strategic activities take place on the frontline.

We analyze the work of tour guides in publicly funded museums as a salient example of frontline workers. As charitable organizations abiding by stringent requirements from public funding bodies (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013; Arts Council England, 2013), while also

reliant on inflowing funds from visitors (see Serota, 2000; Perl, 2000), museums' strategic aims typically relate to audience engagement, entertainment and education. As core points of customer contact, and with significant opportunity to shape the way visitors experience the museum, tour guides are central to ensuring these aims are met (Best, 2012).

Our study exposes the process through which the work of frontline staff contributes to the realization of strategy. Our findings demonstrate the subtle and intricate nature of the embodied work of frontline workers as they 'bring into being' the strategic aims of an organization<sup>1</sup>. We identified five things as central to this process: (1) the situated physical context; (2) audience composition (3) the moral order; (4) the talk, actions and gestures of the guide; and (5) the corresponding talk, actions and gestures of the audience. The 'moral order' (Garfinkel, 1967), a patterned social activity – here, one typical to museum tours – emerged as particularly critical in the process of delivering against the museum's strategic aims, as it was used to draw together the other elements. Specifically, in enacting the 'moral order', frontline workers engage in situated actions that extend beyond organization-specific knowledge but that are also dependent on the particular material context of the performance, such as the museum's objects and their arrangement, as well as the character of the people they are engaging with. Further, since the performance relies on both parties participating to uphold it, tour guides consistently prompted audience engagement with, and enjoyment of, the museum and its objects. Thus, the tour guides brought their audience into the process as active participants, essentially creating a 'working audience' (Best, 2012).

In focusing attention on how the daily practices of frontline workers contribute to a realized strategy, our study makes several contributions to strategic management. First, we go beyond existing studies showing the importance of materiality to strategy work (Dameron et al, 2015; Lê and Spee, *forthcoming*), by demonstrating not just the significance of features of the physical environment, such as room layout and material objects (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al, 2015), but also the importance of audience characteristics and the moral order which underpins interactions. We also coin the phrase 'foundational objects' to recognize that some objects – those which encapsulate the core purpose of an organization and actively transmit strategy content, e.g. a permanent museum collection or a fashion line – are essential to realizing strategy.

Second, by showing how tour guides engage museum visitors as a 'working audience' (Best, 2012), we demonstrate the significant role that frontline workers *and* customers play in

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested this phrasing.

realizing strategy. In particular, we show that the concept of the moral order is critical to this since it is through mutual knowledge about protocols of interaction that frontline workers are able to bring customers into the process as co-workers.

Third, we emphasize the important and skilled work that frontline workers do in bringing strategy into being. We find frontline workers to move beyond discursive competence (Balogun et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) by engaging in skillful and ongoing negotiation of the physical setting while simultaneously working an audience. We use the concept of ‘interactional competence’ to capture this skilled ability of frontline workers to knowledgeably “read” and make use of the physical, spatial and material specifics of the context and those they are interacting with, and to enlist interactional resources to uphold a moral order that brings these others in as a working audience, encouraging them to respond in particular ways. Interactional competence brings together language, material and bodily expressions that others (Cornelissen, Mantere & Vaara, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al, 2015) have argued we need to simultaneously pay attention to in order to reveal how frontline workers orchestrate symphonies of material ‘composition’ (Werle & Seidl, 2015).

### **STRATEGY AND PRACTICE ON THE FRONTLINE**

Mintzberg (1978) introduced a distinction between realized and intended strategies, defining strategy in terms of discernable patterns in action over time, realized potentially independently from any intent (Mintzberg & Waters, 1978). Realized strategies therefore consist of both emergent and intended elements, in which some elements of intended strategy may become unrealized, while others combine with more emergent elements to produce realized strategy. What is important about this perspective is that it focuses attention on process and ‘the how’ of strategy, recognizing that strategy includes “patterned action that does not originate in the intentions of top management” (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014: 1204). This definition of strategy introduces others outside the top management team into the strategy process, and highlights the role of everyday actions in realizing strategy. Hence, realized strategy can be seen as the everyday actions of individuals throughout the firm rather than the documents drafted by top managers (Balogun & Floyd, 2010; Johnson, 1988; Miller, 1992).

#### **The Role of Practices and Materiality in Strategy Work**

It is arguments like these that have provided a platform of departure for recent research exploring strategy as something people in organizations do rather than something organizations have (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Johnson et al, 2003; Balogun et al, 2014;

Whittington, 2006). Scholars working in this area pick up definitions of strategy by Mintzberg and other strategy process scholars who take a more micro and processual - as opposed to content-based - approach (e.g. Burgelman, 1983), encouraging us to consider the interconnections over time in formulation and implementation, and process and content, to discern how strategy work is actually done (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007). They place a focus on the micro-activities that constitute the actual doing of strategy, arguing for the need to open up the black box of the firm and to humanize strategy research. The research brings together the Mintzbergian concern for unpicking the detail of what strategists do, with a more explicit practice epistemology, and, therefore, a concern for the embedded nature of human agency (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006). As part of this there are strong calls to appreciate how people outside of the senior management team, not just middle managers, but many others throughout the organization, contribute to strategy formation, where the word “formation” or “strategizing” refers both to work done in the formulation and realization of strategy (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*).

Yet, so far studies within this developing strategy-as-practice field have largely remained focused on ‘key occasions’ during which observable strategy-oriented activities are likely to occur, such as large-scale change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004 & 2005), strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008;), strategic planning (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009) and strategy away days (Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd & Bourque, 2010). In other words, studies tend to focus on the formal and ceremonial aspects of strategy work, and primarily those in roles clearly delineable as ‘strategic’, such as top managers, middle managers and consultants (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Samra-Fredericks, 2004; Sturdy et al, 2006).

Progress has been made by a few studies which have broken out of the mold, revealing the importance and informal influence of front-line workers in strategy-making, and particularly how strategies are or are not realized. For example, Rouleau (2005) and Ambrosini et al. (2007) show the importance of interactions with customers by middle managers and others, through ‘translating the orientation, over-coding the strategy, disciplining the client, and justifying the change’ (Rouleau, 2005: 1413). Elsewhere, the link between strategy and frontline work has been engaged to a greater degree, making a case for recognizing the role of frontline workers in enacting strategy (e.g., Frei & Morriss, 2012; Hochschild, 1983; Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Yet, there is little research which has focused on how the daily embodied work of frontline workers contributes to how the strategic aims of an organization are realized or brought into being.



The focus placed on strategy as work people in organizations do, also reveals the significance of ‘material’ in strategy work (Lê & Spee, *forthcoming*). A materiality lens urges us to pay attention to the material aspects of strategy work by demonstrating how physical features – like objects and artifacts, and how they are positioned and drawn on – can constrain and enable strategizing activity (Dameron et al., 2015). In shaping the cognitive and behavioral ‘human dynamics’ that underpin strategy work (Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*), the materiality of objects constrains and enables different actions, and allows actors to engage in strategy making (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014; Kaplan, 2011; Paroutis, Franco & Papadopoulos, 2015). Recent work also suggests that it is the constellation of material artifacts, specifically the interplay between different types of material artifacts, which influences strategizing (Werle & Seidl, 2015). This work collectively suggests that materials are central to strategy work (Balogun et al., 2014; Dameron et al., 2015; Streeck, Goodwin and LeBaron 2011).

Yet, despite acknowledging the criticality of materials, few strategy scholars have brought such a view to bear in studies of implementation by examining how materials are linked to realizing a strategy. This is surprising because material objects may be as central or more central to this process. Indeed, material objects may include products and services that encapsulate the organization’s core purpose and strategy, therefore lying at the heart of what the organization does. For instance, in her study of a fashion house, Rouleau (2005) shows how a line of clothing designed by a fashion house was used to encourage customers to connect with the production function of the organization. The clothes were central in delivering the design philosophy of the firm and meeting its strategic objectives. Indeed, the organizational strategy was only realized when people bought clothes; thus, the fashion house used its clothing range to connect people with the brand. The object – in this case the clothing range – was thus central to achieving the firm’s strategy. Of course, this is not unique to the fashion industry, but extends to other product-based industries. For example, software firms base their strategies around their suite of programs, while mobile phone producers build strategies around technology-laden smartphones. Naturally, service-providing firms also use materials to realize their strategies. For instance, in their study of the reinsurance market, Jarzabkowski et al (2015) show how reinsurance deals are made by zooming in on underwriting transactions that are central to the core purpose of the business. Such studies demonstrate that we need a better understanding of how objects are used by frontline workers to realize strategy.

We currently have scarce theoretical and empirical resources within strategic management to address questions about how the daily embodied work of the individuals who interact on the frontline with customers contributes to the realization of strategies, and the role of the material in this. Therefore our concern in this paper with how non-managerial workers contribute to an organization's realized strategy raises interesting challenges. Our study thus recognizes the complex nature of human agency through its incorporation of a workplace studies perspective, which explicitly focuses on the embedded and embodied nature of the work, and a materiality perspective, which emphasizes the social and physical elements of the environment in which strategy work takes place.

### **Workplace Studies as a Means to Unpack Frontline Practice**

Workplace studies offers theoretical and empirical resources that are particularly suited to exploring how the regular work of non-managerial staff leads to a realized strategy that delivers against strategic aims. First, workplace studies direct focus to the study of ordinary, everyday activities. As such, it explicitly studies the non-managerial and frontline workers (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Luff, Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000; Heath & Luff, 2007) often overlooked in strategy work. Second, this approach emphasizes the situated study of embedded and embodied work practice of these workers by taking into account not only activities and talk, but also the specific circumstances in which individuals find themselves, i.e. their material environments (e.g., Luff et al., 2000; Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Heath & Luff, 2007). Thus, context is defined broadly to include, for example, the immediate physical environment of the work and physical artefacts (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007). Third, workplace studies seek to understand the routines, rules, practices, and obligations routinely demonstrated by those participating in that particular type of work. This involves considering practices and the specific contextual features within which they occur alongside the observed phenomena of the occasion or occupation in shaping their practices. In-so-doing, workplace studies offers an explanation of how 'normalcy' at work is achieved as occupational incumbents continuously enact roles and role expectations – simply by their being and acting in that role themselves, whether as an anesthesiologist or an underground train operative (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Luff et al., 2000).

One workplace studies concept that holds particular promise is that of 'moral order'. 'Moral order' refers to the orientation that is established and maintained in any social activity by participants (Goffman, 1981; Fox, 2008): *'the Moral Order consists of the rule governed activities of everyday life. A society's members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal courses of action, familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily*

*life known in common with others and with others taken for granted.*' (Garfinkel, 1964: 235). It is the social order that is upheld by individuals as they go about their daily (working) lives, but which is usually so routine as to be taken-for-granted by participants. Thus, the notion of moral order can be used to explain patterns in mundane activity.

Notably, workplace studies can specify, through detailed studies of situated interactions, what the specific features of a particular 'type' of interaction's moral order might be, including routine material features, as well as the typical characteristics of utterances in that type of interaction. Workplace studies draw on a rich set of methods to support this conceptualization, typically using video-recording to allow for repeated observation and conversation analysis to facilitate sociological micro-analysis. Such methods enable us to move beyond the focus on social and discursive aspects typical in studies of strategy work (see, for example, Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

### **Museum Tour Guides as Frontline Staff Working with Objects to Realize Strategy**

Using the workplace studies approach, our paper explores how frontline workers contribute to an organization's realized strategy. In exploring this question, we focus on the salient context of museums. Museums are particularly relevant, as they explicitly build their strategies around (historic) artefacts. Indeed, museums pursue their core objective and realize their strategy by offering access to collections that preserve history. Physical objects are thus central to museums, both in terms of how they function and how they perform. Yet, access to these objects of historic and strategic significance is mediated by non-managerial frontline workers, particularly tour guides.

While tour guides are typically unpaid, working on a voluntary basis, and thus are unlikely to view their work as strategic, they are frontline workers who act as key points of contact, shaping the way visitors experience the museum, and are thus central to ensuring museums' strategic aims relating to audience engagement, entertainment and education are met. In short, it is the guides through their embodied 'work' who bring into being the strategic aims of the organization. In addition, these actors are aware of the organizational strategy, being privy to the publicly available information about this within the museum space, the publicity literature, and the website, and also being made aware of the museum's strategic aims, reason for existence, and purpose through training they receive. For example, training in the larger museum we study is overseen by visitor engagement experts who understand the strategy because it is central to their role. In the smaller museum we study training is run by the only two paid employees, who are obviously central to strategy formulation because of their privileged position. See below.

As we will show, these guides are important to the successful engagement of museum audiences and therefore they are also important for developing a realized strategy that delivers organizational success against the strategic aims of a museum. Moreover, because the task of engaging audiences is far from simple, they are also skilled workers, demonstrating considerable ‘interactional competence’ in the way they draw on their physical context of work practice, audience composition and moral order. Consider the efforts required to keep a mixed audience, such as children and adults, together and engaged in a tour whilst leading them around a complex space cluttered with objects and other visitors (Best, 2012; Pond, 1993). We show how frontline workers activate different objects to draw in the audience as active participants in an interactive process that orients to and recreates a moral order which in a bottom-up way supports the realization of the strategic aims of the museum’s strategy. It is through such efforts and interactions with visitors on tours, that guides are delivering the audience engagement against which funding is awarded to museums (e.g., Arts Council England, 2010; Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013), and against which, therefore, museums often set their strategic aims (Skinner, Ekelund & Jackson, 2009).

## **METHODS**

This paper draws on data collected at two museum field sites: the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and 78 Derngate. The V&A is the “world’s greatest museum of art and design”, covering more than 2,000 years of history and housing over 4.5 million objects within its collection (V&A Museum, 2014). It is a world renowned museum attracting over three million visitors each year (ALVA, 2014). 78 Derngate in Northampton is the only house in England designed by the influential British designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh (78 Derngate, 2014). It offers unique access to Mackintosh’s architectural and interior design in their original setting, thereby drawing thousands of visitors each year (78 Derngate, 2014).

Albeit different on the surface, these museums share important commonalities in terms of their strategy. First, both museums explicitly build their strategies around (historic) artefacts. The V&A focuses its strategy around its vast collection, while 78 Derngate orients around the building and its various features. Their strategies thus have a very material quality. Second, as organizations with charitable status, both museums are highly dependent on public funding to support their extensive expenditure and ensure continuity. Thus, the museums implicitly and explicitly set their strategic aims around the requirements against which funding is awarded (Skinner et al, 2009). The main funding sources, art councils and lottery funds, base their funding decisions on three core requirements: engaging diverse audiences, educating audiences to increase public knowledge, and providing entertaining and enjoyable

experiences (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013; Arts Council England, 2010). Highly dependent on funding from these sources, museums internalize these requirements as strategic aims (Skinner et al, 2009). For instance, responding to the requisite to engage diverse audiences, the V&A pursues the strategic objective ‘To provide *diverse audiences* with the best quality experience and optimum access to our collections, physically and digitally’ (V&A Strategic Plan 2011-2015, emphasis added). Similarly, responding to the requirement to advance public knowledge, 78 Derngate identifies a key objectives as ‘The *advancement of public knowledge* of and interest in the house, its designers, owners and artefacts’ (Statement of Charitable Objects, Charities Commission, 2011, emphasis added). Third, both museums offer guided tours. Such tours are central in ensuring that strategic aims are met because they offer significant opportunity to engage with visitors and shape the way they experience the museum (Best, 2012). Thus, museum tours afford opportunity to explore how frontline workers contribute to an organization’s realized strategy.

### **Data Collection**

Our primary data comprises over 100 hours of video-recordings<sup>2</sup> of museum tours at the two field sites collected over a period of 18-months by the second author. Detailed transcripts were produced which captured with accuracy changes in speed, volume and emphasis, as well as pauses within and between passages of talk (Jefferson, 1984). These, in conjunction with the video, formed the core focus of the subsequent analysis. However, in order to build a better sense of the tour guides’ cultures and practices (Watson, 2011), this data was complemented with additional sources. First, as part of immersing in the field, the second author observed and engaged in tour guide training. Specifically, she attended formal training, shadowed tour guides, prepared a ‘loose script’ for her own tour, and hosted a number of museum tours over the course of the research period. Second, this author spent time in the tour guides’ staff rooms at both museums, familiarizing herself with the context by joining in with casual chat. Thirdly, informal interviews were undertaken with 20 tour guides; these interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Fourth, we collected strategy documents for analysis, including strategic plans, submissions to funding bodies, external reports and presentations, and websites. Consistent with the workplace

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<sup>2</sup> The wider ethical impacts of using video-recordings must be considered. The approach taken to audience members was using posted signs which assumed their consent to participate (Homan, 2002; Gutwill, 2002). This is common in museum and visitor studies and is based on the idea that in museums people are their ‘public selves’, fully prepared to be filmed or observed by others (Heath & Vom Lehn, 2002). It is assumed that audience members give consent unless they actively opt out. For guides, because the intrusion on their daily lives was potentially too great to assume consent, we gave them information sheets to lay out the details of the project and consent forms which they were asked to sign before we began to film or interview them.

studies approach (Luff et al., 2000), these additional data sources assisted primarily through contextualization of understandings regarding practices and challenges of touring. For example, the analysis of strategic documents highlighted the themes of education, entertainment and engagement in the strategic objectives of museums, while participating in tours revealed the considerable obligation attached to being an audience member.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with the Workplace Studies approach, the data analysis involved three stages: Looking through the data to establish initial areas of interest, extracting fragments for deeper analysis, and analyzing these fragments to formulate findings. As such, our study emerged from the initial observation that tour guides and their audiences were routinely engaged in activities that matched the museums' stated strategic aims by engaging diverse audiences (engagement), advancing public knowledge (education), and providing entertaining and enjoyable experiences (entertainment); consequently, this became our analytical focus.

We used our transcripts and videos to conduct detailed micro-analysis of the work of the tour guides and the audience in terms of the activities which appeared to contribute to the stated strategic aims of the museums. Herein we levied the analytical constructs of 'moral order' (Garfinkel, 1967) and 'working audience' (Best, 2012) to uncover general patterns underlying museum tours. In particular, we identified specific elements of the moral order – i.e. rules that are invoked in the activities of museum tours – within the data. Thus, for instance, we noted that guides mainly speak and audiences mainly listen; that guides address particular recipients, often based on distinguishing characteristics; that audience members who choose not to listen are routinely very quiet so as not to disturb the rest of the group; etc. Uncovering these rules, we noticed that the patterns that comprise moral order were not solely enacted by the guide, but that the audience was also actively involved. Returning to the literature, we found that the concept of a 'working audience' (Best, 2012) best captures this notion. Invoking the concept, we began seeing audiences as active participants that were required to act in particular ways to allow the tour to pass without breakdown and thus uphold the moral order. In short, the audience had to 'do work', for instance acting to "appreciate remarks made, not to reply in any direct way." (Goffman, 1981: 138).

Keeping with the Workplace Studies approach, we then actively sought fragments of data which illustrated these dynamics particularly well; i.e. examples which showed tour guides acting in ways that advanced strategic aims (engagement, education and entertainment). We then analyzed these fragments in detail using the concepts of 'moral order' and 'working audience', looking closely at the written transcripts and the videos to

capture words, actions and material aspects of the situated context, to build an understanding of what the guide was doing and how the audience were responding (or not). To contextualize the examples, we returned to the guide interviews and observation notes. Critically, in focusing on the work of the tour guides *and* the audiences in maintaining the moral order, we could generate an understanding of how they contributed to strategy.

In particular, we identified five explanatory categories, comprising contextual features and activities, which could account for how the guide and audience together realize strategy. These were (1) features of the situated physical context (for example, nature of the object under consideration and room layout); (2) features of the audience (for example, demographic composition and spatial arrangement); and (3) key features of the moral order (for example, that guides mainly speak and audiences mainly listen, etc.); (4) the talk, actions and gestures the guides engages in (for example, pointing out features of an object or making eye contact); and (5) the corresponding talk, actions and gestures of the audience (for example, looking backward and forward between object and tour guide or answering posed questions).

In what follows, and consistent with workplace studies (e.g. Luff et al., 2000; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), we use a small set of detailed examples to illustrate how strategy is realized in our museum contexts. Examples were chosen specifically because they offer interesting or lucid cases that clearly and usefully demonstrate the issues at play. However, these examples were not unique and, thus, to further substantiate our analysis, additional examples are provided in Tables 2 and 4 below. We focus our presentation of the examples around the strategic aims pursued by museums and the five explanatory categories that account for how frontline worker and audience interaction leads to the realization of strategy.

## **FINDINGS**

To explain how guides and audiences routinely act in ways which realize the strategy of the organization, we present two data fragments that illustrate how specific strategic aims were realized through a complex interplay between the physical context, audience features, moral order, and actions of tour guide and audience. In so doing, we chose vignettes for their ability to illustrate specific strategic aims; this means at times foregrounding some strategic aims over others. However, we acknowledge and emphasize that the three strategic aims are entwined and thus naturally always co-present in our vignettes. Given the nature of our data and research question, we employ flow diagrams and photographs to support our narrative where possible.

## Vignette 1: Engaging Diverse Audiences around a Coal Scuttle

**Focal Strategic Aim: Engaging Diverse Audiences.** The museums involved in this research often expressed the need to engage audiences, particularly diverse audiences. This is no doubt at least partially because the criteria for awarding funding to museums include a focus on how inclusive and engaging museums are (Kotler, Kotler and Kotler, 2011; Serota, 2000; Perl, 2000). The Heritage Lottery Fund, for example, explicitly seeks to develop socially inclusive museums, which encourage under-represented groups to engage with heritage sites and activities (PLB Consulting, 2001). Similarly, Arts Council England explicitly orients funding to “helping arts and culture reach more people and engage a broader audience” (Arts Council England, 2013). Therefore engaging audiences – and trying to increase the diversity of these audiences – is a core focus of our museums.

In the case of guided tours, achieving the engagement of diverse audiences becomes a localized challenge routinely dealt with through the ongoing orientation to and re-establishment of a moral order in which guides work to engage audiences and audiences show themselves to have been engaged. This is the dynamic we illustrate. As we explain how the scenario unfolds, please note the complementary information provided in Figure 1 (consecutive images captured as the tour progressed) and Table 2 (a summary of the interactions between guide and audience). We use letters and numbers to connect these to the text.

*Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here*

Table 1: Engaging a Diverse Audience around a Coal Scuttle

Guide's Actions and Context	Audience's actions and context
A1. Guide has led group into the room and has spent some time already talking about the room's various features. She has moved to stand in front of the cabinet.	A2. The audience have gathered around her. The audience is comprised of adults standing at the back of the group, and children standing at the front. Two young boys, Max and Tom, stand in front of the guide and the coal scuttle, looking at the guide
A3. The guide's gaze is sweeping the audience, using adult language and a casual, conversational tone.	A4. The audience members look at the guide and/or at the cabinet, or switch their gaze between the two.
A5. As she says, “And what appears to be a completely...”, she bends down to the cupboard at the bottom of the cabinet, and swings her gaze and head towards the two young boys at the front of the audience.	
A6. Switching to a better-enunciated, more teacherly tone, and, fixing her eyes on the boys and placing her hand on the cupboard handle she says, “what can you imagine is in here?”	
	A7. Tom and Max smile at guide. Tom guesses, ‘is it mineral water?’ He smiles. Other members of the audience smile, too.



A8. The guide says ‘that would be nice, wouldn’t it?’, still in a rounded, well-enunciated teacherly voice. ‘It’s actually...’ she opens the cabinet ‘...a coal scuttle’.	
A9. The guide stands back up.	A10. Tom says ‘oh’ and laughs slightly. Max laughs slightly, too. Two members of the audience turn to Tom and smile in his direction.
A11. The guide returns to the casual tone, beginning a longer, more detailed description of the coal scuttle.	A12. Max and Tom look at each other smiling; the rest of the audience continue to orient to the guide and/or the scuttle.

**The Scenario.** The example we have chosen is an extract from a tour of 78 Derngate. We begin our narrative at the point when the tour group is in the dining room of the house and orients to a built-in wall unit that contains multiple cupboards and bookshelves, as well as a fireplace and a mantelpiece. We next outline the talk, actions and gestures of the tour guide and audience as the scenario unfolds.

**The Sequence of Events.** Two young boys, Max and Tom<sup>3</sup>, stand in front of the guide and the coal scuttle (A1, A2), looking at the guide. The guide’s gaze is sweeping the audience (A3), not stopping on any one or more people for a significant period of time. The audience are alternating their gaze between her and the cupboard (A4). She says (A4):

Guide: And what appears to be a completely=umm normal front and facade of a cupboard there ·hh kind of fits in with our, practical:, um ideas that Bassett-Lowke had and that we were talking about earlier=with fitness-for-purpose,

Then, as the guide turns to the cabinet, she bends down quite far in order to open it (Figure 1, Picture 1), which places her on eye level with the younger members of the audience at the front of the group. She swings her head towards the two boys (A6; Figure 1, Picture 2). They return her gaze as she keeps her hand on the cupboard handle. She looks very specifically towards Max and Tom, and, using a more teacherly tone seemingly directed at them, says:

Guide: , ·hh because it’s *actually* (0.3), what can you imagine is in here?

Tom and Max both look back at the guide, smiling (Figure 1, Picture 3). It is Tom who answers quickly after and guesses ‘mineral water?’ (A7) and continues to smile. Other members of the audience are smiling too. The guide smiles at Tom as he answers, but then lets him know, still looking directly at him, that although ‘that would be nice, it’s actually’ a coal scuttle (A8). As she completes this reply to Tom, she opens the cupboard to reveal the

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms

coal scuttle (Figure 1, Picture 4). She then shifts her position so she is standing back up and on eye level with adult audience members (A9). Tom and Max laugh slightly and other members of the audience smile at them (A10). Now, the guide moves into a longer, more detailed description of the coal scuttle, which is more adult in content and tone, delivered in a less high-pitched voice (A11).

***Unlocking the Sequence of Events.*** To better understand how audience engagement is achieved in this episode, we must more closely look at the interplay between context and activities. We begin with the contextual features of the tour, as these are critical to understanding the activities of tour guide and audience. There are two critical aspects of the **situated physical context**. First, two of the cupboards in the wall unit contain coalscuttles, which are hidden from the audience until the cupboards are opened. Because of this ‘disguise’, the coalscuttles are revealed as a ‘surprise’. Second, the scuttles are located low to the ground, requiring the guide to bend down to open them.

The **audience composition and arrangement** also play an important role in how the tour unfolds. The tour group is age-diverse. This is common to museum tour groups, but presents a challenge to tour guides, as the interests, foci and concentration levels of audience members will almost certainly differ. The tour guide is standing in front of the wall unit, with the audience gathered around her. Two young children stand at the front of the group, while the adults stand a bit further back. Additionally, the tour is influenced by several salient aspects of the **moral order**, which are upheld by the group. For example, it is deemed appropriate for the tour guide to use different tones of voice for adults and for children; tour guide and audience shift their gaze based on context and narrative; the guide primarily speaks and the audience primarily listens; and simultaneously the audience acts ‘engaged’, acknowledging the tour guide by smiling and responding to questions.

Now let us consider the **actions of the tour guide**<sup>4</sup>. She draws on these contextual factors, making use of the *mixed composition* of the audience. There are adults, who are standing at the back and to whom detailed information about the cupboard is directed. There are also children, standing at the front and who get asked a more fun question about what the cupboard is for. Their *different heights* coupled with the *low position of the cupboard* helps the guide to delineate different parts of this short section of the tour for each group. The switch from adult-oriented language to a child-friendly question and back to adult-oriented language reflects the transition from engaging adults, to children, and back again. The guide

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<sup>4</sup> In our descriptions of the actions of the tour guide and the actions of the audience, we underline text to emphasize actions and *italic text* to indicate material features.

uses tone of voice and direction of gaze from her stooped position to highlight that her question is aimed at engaging the children in the audience, before standing up and using the answer to the same question to segway into more adult talk. Thus, the guide actively constructs an opportunity for engagement and participation. This technique of engagement allows the guide to uphold the moral order. Prompting individual engagement acts not only as a method of engaging that specific audience member but also as a reminder to others that they could be called on at any moment, too, encouraging their on-going engagement in case they should need to recall what has just been said or asked of them.

Finally, let us look at the **actions of the audience**. Audience members take up the opportunity to engage; upholding the moral order of museum tours. Thus, they do not just passively listen as the guide speaks, but also are willing and ready to participate when they are called upon to do so. Specifically, audience members are available when the guide selects them and are not engaged in other matters and so are free and able to offer a response to the guide's question. The child members of the group engage with the guide by answering her question about the *cabinet*, while the adult members of the group engage by smiling at the guide, indicating their willingness for the guide to engage specifically with the children.

***Insert Table 2 about here***

***Realizing Audience Engagement.*** In this example of the coal scuttle, and the additional examples provided in Table 2, we show how the situated physical context, the audience composition and arrangement, and the moral order are skillfully assembled to achieve audience engagement in a complex interplay between context, tour guide, and audience. In this particular fragment, the guide orients to, and brings together, features of the audience composition like the diversity of the audience group (young-old), features of the physical context like the nature of the focal object (hidden, low) and the physical arrangement of the audience in space (younger members positioned in front of the coal scuttle), and features of the moral order (different tone of voice to engage adults versus children). These aspects of context are used by the guide to emerge a course of action in which the guide skillfully weaves together audience, physical context and moral order, creating an episode particular to that tour but nonetheless routinely focused on the common challenge of engaging a diverse audience. Materiality is thus absolutely central to the actions of the guide. The audience is also drawing on the context in its response, acknowledging the need, for example, for the guide to occasionally address particular sub-groups in the audience, and showing appreciation of the way the guide is using the nature of objects to do so. They recognize the features of the moral order used by the guide, such as gaze and tone of

voice, and engage in actions that indicate to her that they are working with her to uphold the moral order. Therefore, the moral order which is enacted in the emergent yet context-particular episode through the guides' actions, talk and gestures and those of the audience, is one which tessellates with and realizes one of the strategic aims of the organization: Engaging audiences that are often diverse.

## **Vignette 2: Educating and Entertaining Audiences about the Rampendahl Deer Antler Chair**

***Focal Strategic Aims: Advancing Public Knowledge and Providing Entertaining and Enjoyable Experiences.*** Our data also shows evidence of audience education and entertainment, two further strategic aims of museums. Contemporary museums are faced with having to guard against either becoming too 'Disneyfied' and thus a dumbed down version of the museum or becoming too dreary and thus a tedious, unvisited repository (Perl, 2000). This tension is reflected in the ways in which funding bodies and therefore museums express their main strategic aims. For instance, The Heritage Lottery Fund (2014) expressly seeks to invest in projects that help people learn about heritage, stating that: "Individuals will have developed their knowledge and understanding of heritage". At the same time, it places emphasis on enjoyment as a desired outcome of funded projects (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013: 3). These two elements are enshrined in V&A's mission statement: "To enrich people's lives and inspire individuals and everyone in the creative industries, through *the promotion of knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world*" (emphasis added). Indeed, in many of the museums' strategic documents, ideals of enjoyment and education are co-located within the same aim or bullet point, reflecting the perceived need to balance these issues within the museum sector. Achieving education and entertainment simultaneously is thus an important part of the museum tour and a key element of the tour guide's role. We focus on this issue in our next vignette. Complementary information is provided in Figure 2, which presents consecutive images from the tour, and Table 3, which tracks the interactions between guide and audience. We again use letters and numbers to connect these to the text.

***The Scenario.*** The example selected is an extract from a tour of a gallery in the Victoria and Albert museum. The tour group is small, consisting of only three visitors: Piola, Claudia and Annabelle. The episode revolves around the viewing of a German chair from the 1840s made from deer antlers by Rampendahl. Our narrative begins as the tour group orients to the chair, with the guide in front of the chair and the group in front of her. We now describe the talk, actions and gestures of the tour guide and audience as the scenario unfolds.

***The Sequence of Events.*** The guide is standing by the Rampendahl chair (B1) and the

audience are facing her and the chair (B2). As the guide points out the chair, she turns to look towards two audience members, Piola and Claudia (B3). Despite looking at them, they do not look at her, instead continuing to stare at the chair with unsmiling, straight faces (B4; Figure 2, Picture 1). She turns away from them toward Annabelle, the final audience member (B5). Annabelle also continues to look at the object rather than the guide, but her facial expression is very different from that of the others, actually smiling a little as the guide turns towards her (B6). The guide says in a laughing voice, ‘very solemn faces [on that one]’, referring to the serious faces of the other audience members (B7; Figure 2, Picture 2). Annabelle nods after the guide’s comment, still looking amused and indeed smiling more broadly, whilst the other audience members continue to look serious (B8; Figure 2, Picture 3). The guide starts to describe the chair, relating her description to the solemnity of the audience (B9):

Guide: And we know that these were (0.3) extremely popular with the British public (0.2) at the time although today they look as unattractive perhaps and as uncomfortable (0.3) •hh umm uh, eh t-t-to our contemporary eye

She then offers a detailed description of the chair and its cultural, social and historical significance. She explains that it is made of deer’s antlers and that the other decorative elements of the chair are boar teeth. What is notable here from an educational point of view is that the tour guide knows from experience that the chair is gruesome to modern viewers, although it was highly fashionable at the time it was made (circa 1860). The guide seeks to educate the audience on how dramatically tastes have changed in the intervening period. Drawing on the object in this way thus helps the guide to educate audiences on the Victorian era and demonstrate the “eclectic” nature of Victorian taste.

***Insert Figure 2 and Table 3 about here***

Table 3 Audience Engagement and Enjoyment German Chair

<b>Guide’s Actions and Context</b>	<b>Audience’s actions and context</b>
B1. The guide is standing in front of a Rampendahl chair made of deer’s antlers.	B2. The audience are looking towards the chair and the guide.
B3. As the guide points out the chair for the first time, she turns to look towards two audience members, Piola and Claudia.	
	B4. Piola and Claudia do not return the guide’s gaze, instead looking at the chair. They have straight, unsmiling faces.
B5. The guide looks from them towards Annabelle.	
	B6. Annabelle smiles a little as the guide turns towards her.
B7. The guide says to Annabelle, but seemingly referring to Piola and Claudia, ‘Very solemn faces’, and she accompanies this statement with a laugh.	

	B8. Annabelle does a much bigger smile, seeming to join in with the guide's joke, and she also nods. The other audience members continue to look serious.
B9. The guide begins a description of the chair which draws in both responses, saying 'and we know that these were extremely popular with the British public at the time although today they look as unattractive perhaps and as uncomfortable to our contemporary eye.'	B10. All audience members hold their expressions whilst the guide begins her more detailed description of the chair, its status and provenance. Piola and Claudia continue to look serious. Annabelle continues to nod and smile.

***Unlocking the Sequence of Events.*** To appreciate how audience entertainment and education are achieved in this vignette, we again unpick the sequence of events to explain the interconnection between context and activities. Before revisiting the activities, we review the contextual features of the tour, as these are important in how the tour guide engages with the audience. The **situated physical context** is critical in shaping the interaction between tour guide and audience. One particularly significant feature is that the chair is made from deer antlers, which is considered grizzly for contemporary tastes. Another important feature is that the chair is located behind the guide, so that she must continuously face the audience.

The **audience composition and arrangement** is also important. This is a small group comprised of only three audience members. While Piola and Claudia have joined the tour together, Annabelle is alone. There are thus two distinct groups in the audience. Additionally, the audience offers diverse reactions to the chair, either distaste or amusement. The tour makes salient several aspects of the **moral order**. For example, the audience is expected to look at the object that the guide points out. Thus, the guide looking at them does not mean that they return her gaze, but rather that they show they are listening to the talk about the chair by looking at the object instead. Whilst this behavior is uncommon in general interaction, since to look at someone would usually be to have them look back, this is a common pattern in guided tours. Furthermore, audience members that are singled out and addressed tend to respond positively to the tour guide, in this case, by smiling knowingly. Similarly, tour guides often separate audiences into groups, drawing on audience features in one group (here the different facial expressions), and using these features to place the different groups in particular roles to encourage them to participate in a specific way.

Now let us turn to the emergent **actions of the tour guide** and how these, framed by contextual factors, deliver enjoyment and education. The tour guide immediately separated the audience into two groups, drawing on knowledge of *who arrived together* and the *audience reactions to the chair*. On the one hand, the guide uses Piola and Claudia's *straight faces* as a sign that they are finding the object grizzly, and skillfully and light-heartedly

comments on this to create a conspiratorial alliance between herself and Annabelle, entertaining her and making her more likely to respond. On the other, the guide also draws in Piola and Claudia by acknowledging their reaction and describing the chair in relation to their solemnity, using this more serious feature to return to her educatory role. At the same time, she prevents alienating Piola and Claudia by placing her conspiratorial comments in the context of laughter, which softens them and make them more acceptable. The **actions of the audience** are equally critical. Audience members are acknowledging the reactions the guide has observed, and uphold the moral order by, for instance, continuing to look solemn, smiling or smiling more broadly, and looking at the chair as expected.

*Insert Table 4 about here*

***Realizing Audience Education and Entertainment.*** Through the example of the chair, and the additional examples provided in Table 4, we show how the situated physical context, the audience composition and arrangement, and the moral order are skillfully assembled in the interplay between context, tour guide, and audience in order to educate *and* entertain the audience. In this particular illustration, the guide orients to, and brings together, the significant features of the audience composition in the apparently diverse reactions of the audience (distaste versus amusement), the features of the physical context (the object she is discussing is known to be grizzly), and features of the moral order (drawing on different facial expressions and using speech to let the two audience groups know she is comparing them to encourage them to participate in different ways). These aspects of context lead to an emergent course of action in which the guide skillfully weaves them together, to deliver something specific to that tour, but nonetheless routinely focused on the common challenge of combining enjoyment and education. The audience is also drawing on the context in its response, acknowledging the reactions the guide has noticed. They appear oriented to the guide's attempts to ensure the smooth running of the tour, and actively participate with her in upholding it. Therefore, the moral order which is upheld in this emergent yet context-particular episode tessellates with and leads to the realization of the strategic aims of the organization – in this case balancing enjoyment (role play and laughter) and education (factual information about the chair). Thus, the tour guide's interactional competence is central to realizing these strategic aims within the context of a guided tour.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this paper, using the workplace studies approach, we set out to explore how frontline workers (in our case museum tour guides) contribute to an organization's realized strategy. We demonstrate the complex, intricate and embodied nature of the work that

museum guides do to engage the audience as active participants in the process of realizing strategy. Critically, we show that the guides' understanding and actions are informed by the moral order, and also the immediate situated physical context and the audience composition. We identify five elements central to this work: (1) the situated physical context; (2) audience; (3) features of the moral order; (4) the talk, actions and gestures of the guide; and (5) the corresponding talk, actions and gestures of the audience. As our examples reveal, museum guides skillfully bring these elements together to enact a patterned social activity by drawing on and creating a 'moral order' typical to museum tours (Garfinkel, 1967), using social norms and material features of the environment to their advantage.

Tour guides thus expertly weave together various elements of the environment through situated talk, actions and gestures which are stimulated by and stimulate reciprocal audience talk, actions and gestures. It is in the interplay of these material and immaterial elements – skillfully coordinated by the frontline worker – that a pattern of interaction emerges in which the audience is engaged, learns and enjoys, thereby realizing a museum's strategy. The process also shows the significant role the audience has in upholding the moral order, thereby emphasizing the significance of the skillful enacting of the moral order by the guide in achieving the strategic objectives of the museum. In short, our findings highlight that this process involves significant interpretive work, informed by the physical setting, the audience composition and the moral order.

Awareness of this dynamic has three important implications for organization studies. First, it gives a more central role to material in the realization of strategy than previously recognized. Second, it demonstrates that 'outsiders' have an important part to play in realizing strategy. Finally, it highlights the importance of frontline workers and their skilled work in bringing strategy into being.

### ***The Material and Embedded Nature of Strategy***

Building on the material turn in strategy and organization studies (Dameron et al, 2015; Lê and Spee, *forthcoming*), we draw attention to the centrality of materiality in how frontline workers realize strategy. Our findings show that tour guides actively invoke elements of their context – aspects of the physical environment, features of the audience, and the moral order – as an important part of their work. This extends the "different materialities" reported in strategy work (cf. Werle & Seidl, 2015: 37) to include new materialities – specifically, features of the audience and the moral order – and a new set of workers – overtly, customer-facing frontline workers. Additionally, by studying museums, which explicitly build their strategies around artefacts and offering access to these through frontline



workers, we highlight just how central objects can be in the realization of strategy. Indeed, with strategic aims around audience engagement with, education about and entertainment through artefacts, objects become critical to how strategy is realized. While an object like a historically significant house (see Vignette 1) and something like a whiteboard marker, an object significant to work in other contexts (e.g. Hodgkinson & Wright, 2002), may both be involved in bringing strategy into being, they have a very different role and thus constitute a different type of materiality. This relates to and extends the recently introduced notion of “objectual types of materialities” (Werle & Seidl, 2015: 37).

Werle & Seidl (2015), introduce primary and secondary (partial) objects to capture their “different influence on the evolving understanding of the strategic topic” (p 34). In their study of strategy workshops, primary objects represented and therefore mapped the overall strategic topic of the workshop (in their case flexible production) while the secondary object – often created in response to a primary object – mapped only select parts of the strategic topic. We pick up on this implied ‘hierarchy’ of objects in terms of their centrality to and purpose in the strategy process, extending their categorization by applying it to strategy realization and introducing a third type of object: the foundational strategy object. A foundational strategy object encapsulates the core purpose of the organization and, therefore, is central to its success. Hence, foundational strategy objects relate to the content of strategy, while primary and secondary strategy objects relate to the process of strategy. Such objects are likely to have different affordances (Gibson, 1977) and be used in different ways. This responds to findings by others indicating that ‘selling the product’, whether it be Starbucks coffee (Frei & Morriss, 2012) or fashion items (Rouleau, 2005), realizes the strategy of the organization.

### ***Strategy on the periphery: Audience as co-workers***

Our findings also link to work of ‘strategy in the periphery’ (Regnér, 2003), indicating that those not traditionally considered strategists may engage in strategically important work. In this study, our frontline workers, the tour guides, are central in realizing the strategy. However, beyond that, we also demonstrate that visitors are integral in enabling this work by taking an active role in the tours, for instance, by externalizing interest and amusement, and responding to questions posed by the tour guide, thereby helping to create a tour characterized by engagement, enjoyment and education, three things central to the strategy of museums. The concept of the working audience (Best, 2012) brings the customer into the process as an active participant. Our study is thus one of the very few studies of strategy exploring the role of customers in the strategy process.

Specifically, we show how frontline worker-customer interaction creates an important dynamic which is essential in realizing customer-centric strategies of engagement, enjoyment and education. Our findings show how talk, behavior and gestures of frontline workers (in our case tour guides) interact with the talk, behavior and gestures of customers (the tour group), highlighting the critical human dynamics that underpin strategy work that other studies are starting to reveal (Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*). It goes beyond these studies by demonstrating the micro-interaction in context, particularly drawing out the importance of the moral order in enrolling customers in strategy work. As with customers in coffee shops (Frei & Morriss, 2012) and fashion boutiques (Rouleau, 2005), the guide is able to enroll the audience by engaging in patterns of interaction commonly understood through the moral order. By doing so, the guide elicits from the audience particular patterns of behavioral responses that sustain and uphold the moral order. This type of interaction is quite different from the within-business (Lê & Jarzabkowski, *forthcoming*) or business-to-business (Jarzabkowski et al, 2015) interactions normally studied in our field, as the customer has no formal relationship with the museum, yet is critical in enacting its strategy.

The moral order is central to frontline worker-customer interaction, and the involvement of customers as co-workers, since it creates a mutually understood protocol which can be used by the frontline worker to draw customers in despite their lesser knowledge of the work context. Others show how those embedded in a context can bracket cues (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005) from their environment and connect these with previous experiences to develop meaning and sensegiving to “disembedded” others (Whiteman and Cooper, 2011). Those who are more embedded have a greater capability to read their context and act appropriately to unfolding situations, since they draw on more complex mosaics of underlying knowledge (Samra-Fredericks, 2005). Thus, whilst guide and audience both emerge as engaged in the tour, there is an important distinction to make between them. Guides are ‘embedded’, consistent with Whiteman and Cooper (2011), since they bring with them into the tour, and thus demonstrate throughout it, a material understanding of the local peculiarities of their museums and the interactive effects of the layouts and objects. Audiences by comparison can be described as ‘disembedded.’ Although they have a sense of what is expected of them in this category of activity known as a ‘guided tour’, they rarely have the detailed knowledge of the particular context in the way guides do. Our work thus highlights the important role of ‘others’ in the strategy process and suggests the value of examining other individuals and groups outside of managerial roles, which may

impact the strategy process, including, for example, consultants and non-executive directors, or business-to-business relationships.

### ***Skillfulness of Guide: Interactional Competence***

Our findings also extend other studies (Ambrosini et al 2007; Kaplan & Norton, 2001; Hochschild, 1983; Frei & Morriss, 2012; Rouleau 2005) that demonstrate the significance of the work of frontline workers in helping organizations achieve their strategic goals by showing that this involves the frontline worker (in our case the guide) engaging in skillful work. The guides are displaying what we refer to as “interactional competence”, the skilled ability of individuals to knowledgeably “read” and make use of the physical, spatial and material specifics of the context and those they are interacting with, and to enlist interactional resources to uphold a moral order that brings these others in as a working audience, encouraging them to respond in particular ways.

Others (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011) have identified the important role of discursive competence, the ability of an individual “to knowledgeably craft and share a message that is meaningful, engaging and compelling within his/her context of operation” in engaging others with an organization’s strategic aims. Discursive competence captures the fact that influencing involves more than just the skillful use of language. It involves the mobilization of specific verbal expressions and symbolic representations, but also activities such as “staging the conversation”, “relating to others” and “setting the scene” for the conversations . This requires actors to draw on their deep knowledge of the organization’s sociocultural rules.

Yet, at the same time, discursive competence does not go far enough to capture the skilled nature of the work of the frontline worker we uncover here, and particularly the nature of the ongoing mutual adjustment between frontline workers and their customers as a “working audience”, and the ways that they both uphold and recreate the moral order. Whilst discursive competence captures the idea of scene setting it does not, possibly because it was identified through interviews, identify the skillful and ongoing negotiation of physical settings and the simultaneous work of the audience. The notion of interactional competence is underpinned by a moral order, which is achieved through the simultaneous work undertaken by both front-end customer-facing staff and their customers. As such, interactional competence is not just about reading and invoking the organizational context of practice to influence others, but also about recognizing that influencing others involves mutual work performed in accordance with a pattern of social activity. Indeed, our empirical examples above, and in Tables 3 and 5, show that the engagement process is underpinned by a wide

range of talk, behavior and gestures of guide and audience that enable them to orient to and uphold the moral order. We offer many illustrations of guides going beyond mere talk by making eye contact with particular individuals or drawing them in with gestures, pointing to particular features of objects, physically imitating or demonstrating aspects of the objects under discussion, balancing time given to those who wish to be actively involved with those who just wish to listen, etc. Our examples thus show how the verbal and non-verbal are woven together. Thus the moral order itself reveals a particular situated understanding of practice, which the guide needs to routinely and skillfully draw on. The emphasis on moral order goes beyond the objects, talk and body past studies have focused on (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al, 2015).

## **Conclusions**

Our contribution lies in the way our data can demonstrate the intricate and embodied nature of the ‘work’ of workers to bring into being the strategic aims of an organization. We levied the analytical constructs of ‘moral order’ (Garfinkel, 1967) and ‘working audience’ (Best, 2012) to uncover general patterns underlying museum tours. In particular, we show how frontline workers activate different objects that relate to the core purpose of the organization (in our case historical artefacts) to draw customers into the interactive process as active participants. Further, we show how they do this through participating with their audience in on-going and mutual interaction oriented to maintaining and recreating a moral order which supports bottom-up realization of the strategic aims of the museums’ strategy. Applying the concept of the ‘moral order’ (Garfinkel, 1967) to our data has allowed us to show in a way others have not, its relevance to how frontline workers engage with customers, also leading to the realization of an organization’s strategy. Using museums, we illustrate how strategy is realized on a day-to-day basis through a number of emergent episodes in which the guide skillfully weaves together significant features of the situated physical context, the audience and the moral order, to create a ‘working audience who, with the guide, orients to and recreates the moral order of the tour, in a way that leads to the realization of the strategic aims of the museum.

We thus add to studies highlighting the extent to which strategic work involves skilled, situated performances underpinned by tacit and particular context-specific knowledge relevant to those they are engaging with (see, for example Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Rouleau 2005; Samra-Fredericks, 2003) by suggesting the need to move beyond discursive competence to interactional competence. The use of the workplace studies approach has been particularly valuable here, enabling us to not only explore the work of those not routinely

involved in settings typically defined as “strategic,” but also to go beyond the social and discursive aspects typically studied in strategy work to build an understanding of skilled work as incorporating the bodily and the material, meeting calls from others (Balogun et al, 2014) to move beyond research which focuses in a siloed manner on, for example, discursive practices or material practices. Indeed, our findings show how strategizing work is socially accomplished through the coordination of discursive, material and bodily resources, thereby encouraging researchers to examine the interplay of talk, materiality and gestures (see also Jarzabkowski et al., 2015; Streeck, Goodwin and LeBaron 2011).

There are general findings in what we present here about how frontline workers realize strategy through participating with their audience in on-going and mutual interaction oriented to maintaining and recreating a particular moral order around foundational objects. Yet we need to reflect on the implications and relevance of our findings for other organizational settings given our particular context of museums and non-managerial, volunteer, frontline workers. First, the specificity of a moral order to a particular context means its nature will differ by industry, and thus type of employee such as museum volunteer versus coffee shop paid barista. Second, we know other types of frontline workers to be important to the realization of strategy, such as middle managers in fashion companies (Rouleau, 2005) and underwriters in reinsurance companies (Jarzabkowski et al, 2015). These different contexts need exploring to develop a more generic understanding of the significance of moral order and interactional competence in the realization of strategy by front-line workers and, of course, the significance of these in other high-interaction strategy work contexts involving different stakeholder groups, such as strategy workshops or strategy consultant / senior executive meetings.

Our findings on foundational objects, objects that encapsulate the core purpose of an organization and actively transmit strategy content, are significant. So far studies of the material aspects of strategy work have focused largely on objects used by ‘obvious’ strategists (e.g. senior managers) at ‘obvious’ strategy sites (e.g. strategy workshops - see Hodgkinson & Wright, 2002), thereby naturally giving greater emphasis to processes of strategy formulation. Werle and Seidl (2015) have extended this through their concepts of primary and secondary objects and their role in mapping strategic topics, yet these still relate to processes of formulation. Ours is the first study to identify the role of material objects that capture and transmit the content of strategy. In so doing, we show the need for frontline workers to engage “customers” with these objects to realize strategy. While these findings are clearly relevant to product-based organizations that sell tangible products ranging from

clothing and other aesthetic items to high-tech devices such as phones, tablets and laptops, we also need to investigate their relevance in other more service-based contexts, such as telesales. This leaves open for investigation how foundational objects contribute to the realization of strategy in such organizations, if at all, as well as how foundational objects contribute to the realization of strategy more generally in contexts where their presence is more obvious.

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**Figure 1: Engaging a Diverse Audience**



TG: Because it's actually



what can you imagine is in  
here?



Max: (mineral water)



TG: be n^ice wouldn't it? But  
it's actually coal

**Figure 2: Increasing Public Knowledge**



TG: then you get the piece  
(0.3) that has the elaborate  
bit, (0.3) without the  
previous style (2.3)



t'eh very solemn faces on  
the(hh) at



wuh (heh) ^n= ·^hhhehh ·^theh  
·^heh (0.2)

Table 2: (Diverse) Audience Engagement

Overview of example	Significant features of the situated physical context	Significant features of the audience composition and arrangement	Relevant aspects of the moral order enlisted by the guide and/or audience	Guide's talk, actions, gestures	Audience's talk, actions, gestures
Group is clustered around built-in cabinet and fireplace. Guide is standing in front of cabinet. She bends down, places hand on cupboard handle and turns to the children, making eye contact to ask them 'what do you think is in here?' Max provides a wrong answer. Guide opens cupboard to reveal coal scuttle, stands up and makes eye contact with the adults. She then directs more factual talk about the coal scuttle to the adults.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the exterior, the scuttle looks like a cupboard – its true purpose is hidden until it is opened.</li> <li>The coal scuttle is located at a low level, requiring the guide to bend down to open it which also places her closer to the children, helping her to direct a comment towards them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children are directly in front of guide; when she opens scuttle, she is on their eyeline.</li> <li>Adults are positioned behind children but can still see scuttle and guide easily from their position. They are on the guide's eyeline when she is standing up.</li> <li>From the audience's perspective, the guide is located in front of the cabinet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The guide uses questions to engage audience members directly.</li> <li>Guide uses talk aimed at children or adults to direct parts of the tour to children or adults.</li> <li>The audience self-selects whether to respond or not based on whether they orient to the talk and actions as being aimed at them or not.</li> <li>Children show engagement with this part of the tour aimed at them, by smiling and talking to the guide.</li> <li>The adults do not respond or react to the question, treating it as aimed at the children in the audience.</li> <li>Audience members attend to guide and thus routinely recognise being selected and offer a response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guide uses tone of voice and direction of gaze to highlight that her question is aimed at engaging children</li> <li>She withholds opening the cabinet until there is a guess at what it contains.</li> <li>She switches between talk aimed at children and talk aimed at adults.</li> <li>She makes use of her gaze and bodily orientation as well as her talk to highlight who she is aiming the tour at right then.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children return the guide's gaze and smile when they treat talk as being directed at them.</li> <li>One child orients to the question directed towards the children by providing an answer.</li> <li>Adults do not respond to the question, orienting to the sense that the question is aimed at the children.</li> </ul>
Group gathered around a sculpture of Handel. Partway through her talk, the guide mimics the sculpture's pose, leaning on it. Audience members laugh and one says 'casual', in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Handel is 'slouching' in the sculpture; the casual pose becomes the basis for an audience comment which in turn seems to encourage the guide to focus on how 'casual' rococo styling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The audience is gathered in a loose horseshoe around the sculpture, meaning that they can all access each other's comments and positions and engage readily with the tour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guide uses a joke to help the audience engage through direct participation (this is a common device).</li> <li>Guide uses comment to create context specific-tours (a common device), which relate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guide mimics Handel's 'slouch', and engages audience thusly.</li> <li>Audience member comment provides opportunity for</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Audience demonstrates engagement by showing themselves as listening, laughing, and commenting.</li> <li>Audience looks at the guide and the sculpture,</li> </ul>

response to guide's actions. Guide uses the comment to talk about the sculpture's asymmetric, 'casual' rococo styling. She thus uses an individual comment to build talk relevant to both individual and group.	<p>is, allowing audience and guide engagement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sculpture is located at a height, allowing the guide to lean on it and mimic the pose, facilitating engagement.</li> <li>• The sculpture is on a plinth against a flat wall, allowing the audience to gather in a loose horseshoe around it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The guide and sculpture are in front of the audience, meaning that the audience see sculpture and guide without needing to adjust gaze.</li> </ul>	<p>to this specific audience and thus engage them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience responds to the joke with laughter, comments, smiles and direct attention, showing that they are participating in the tour.</li> </ul>	<p>guide to segway into more specific talk about rococo style's asymmetry and informality, further highlighting the engagement of this specific audience based on their stated interests and comments.</p>	<p>demonstrating engagement in the tour.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The audience member's comment facilitates guide talk about rococo style.</li> </ul>
Guide talks about small casket inside display case, asking audience members if they are able to see it and waiting for responses before talking further.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Casket is small, located in a relatively low cabinet and the highlighted feature is delicate. All of these features encourage audience engagement by prompting them to gather around closely.</li> <li>• The glass case in which the casket is located allows relatively close access, so detail can be observed through tight gathering of audience, thus increasing opportunities for engagement through proximity which draws audience in to the tour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group is large; it would be impossible for them all to see the cabinet from their starting positions so this object draws them in.</li> <li>• The cabinet allows a number of them to see at the same time, so the guide can keep talking whilst they come closer to look.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The guide uses a question; questions routinely encourage/demonstrate audience engagement through the requirement of direct participation that they engender.</li> <li>• Questions such as 'can you see?' also prompt movement to encourage people to see, and so demonstration of/actual engagement occurs.</li> <li>• Audience members recognise that questions which ask if they can see require a positive verbal or bodily response, or movement to a better position and so undertake actions to facilitate this as they see it is what is required of them. In a way, their movement acts as a response – 'I couldn't, but I can if I move'.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide uses the question, 'can you see' which prompts audience members to move to positions which mean that they can, and thus engages them directly, rather than just talking 'at' them.</li> <li>• By pointing at the detail of the object, the guide can highlight the need for audiences to observe the detail and thus encourage them to move and become more involved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many members who can see reply positively or nod.</li> <li>• Members who cannot see move to better positions.</li> <li>• The verbal and physical responses prompted by the question elicit and/or demonstrate engagement in tour.</li> </ul>

Table 4: Examples of educating and entertaining audiences

Overview of example	Significant features of the situated physical context	Significant aspects of audience composition and arrangement	Relevant aspects of the moral order enlisted by the guide and/or audience	Guide Talk, Actions, Gestures	Audience Talk, Actions, Gestures
Guide talking about chair made of deer's antlers. She turns to one audience member to share a joke about the 'serious' expressions of two other audience members. The guide uses the mixture of audience responses to the chair and her joke about this to contrast contemporary tastes with Victorian tastes. The guide also seems to make use of a joke to make the tour 'fun' and enjoyable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The chair is made primarily of deer's antlers and was designed and manufactured in the Victorian era.</li> <li>Deer's antler furniture was popular in the Victorian era.</li> <li>The chair is situated on a low plinth behind a guard rail.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the audience's perspective, the chair is located behind and to the side of the guide.</li> <li>The guide's pointing, facial expressions and gestures are all easily accessible to the small audience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides use assessments of perceptible differences between audience members to draw individuals into the tour and thus to build individual and/or group participation.</li> <li>Audience members routinely 'play along' with guides' assessments of them, playing the roles they have been cast in.</li> <li>Audience members can be called on to participate at any time, and thus must be routinely attentive to the tour so that they do not miss anything.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guide points out the chair to the audience.</li> <li>Guide makes a joke which contrasts solemn and amused audience responses. Guide laughs along with her own joke, showing that it is supposed to be funny.</li> <li>This joke allows her to compare Victorian and contemporary tastes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One audience member looks amused at the chair; the other two look serious.</li> <li>Following the guide's joke, the individuals hold their responses, continuing in their 'assigned' roles.</li> </ul>
Guide talks to audience about whalebone corset, joking that she 'would not like to wear it'. She thus highlights discomfort of corsetry in an entertaining way.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Corset's boned construction is clearly visible from where the audience is standing.</li> <li>The corset is in a display case that is lit in such a way that the whalebones can be seen.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Audience stands around guide, facilitating her pointing out the boned construction.</li> <li>The guide's pointing gesture and face are accessible to all audience members.</li> <li>The audience is close enough for the guide to be able to make a quiet 'conspiratorial' joke and they can all hear.</li> <li>The audience is mostly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides recognise the utility of jokes for prompting audience engagement through laughter or comments.</li> <li>Audience members orient to participant role by publicly responding to jokes through laughter or comments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guide points at the corset.</li> <li>Guide makes a joke about the corset.</li> <li>Guide smiles as she makes the joke.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Audience listens and responds to guide's comment with comments and looks of their own.</li> <li>Audience members show engagement with object and guide through their responses and looking.</li> <li>One audience member even shakes her head and says 'no, thank you'.</li> </ul>

		comprised of women, making the joke more conspiratorial.			
Guide says that Chihuly chandelier hanging in V&A reception is made of 1300 pieces, weighs 1700 kilos, and took six men five days to construct. Audience members look shocked and/or amused.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chandelier is huge, hanging down many metres from ceiling into reception.</li> <li>• The reception is busier and noisier than the galleries, meaning that the audience needs to gather close and the guide really needs to emphasise what she is saying.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chandelier is located in front of the group at some height.</li> <li>• Audience members are tightly clustered around guide.</li> <li>• Guide has her back to the chandelier.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guides can use emphasis to highlight dramatic features because the audience orients to the moral order in which guides primarily talk and audiences primarily listen.</li> <li>• Audiences routinely respond to guides' emphasis of talk with responses conveying surprise or incredulity (as they do here).</li> <li>• Audiences respond to emphasised talk with direct engagement, both physically and verbally, showing that they are amazed/disgusted/etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide picks interesting and dramatic object.</li> <li>• Guide uses loud, enunciated talk and gestures to highlight key words and mark talk out as special (in this case, large).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience shows themselves to be engaged and entertained through talk.</li> <li>• They also show engagement through gestures (dropped jaws, head nods, 'wow's).</li> </ul>
Guide points out where house owners used to take morning coffee, saying it 'would have been a pleasant spot to sit in'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coffee table is in place in the window bay.</li> <li>• This area of the room is demarcated by an inset wall and cabinet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience and guide are standing at edge of area used to take coffee.</li> <li>• The coffee table and the inset wall act as devices around which they can arrange themselves into a loose cluster.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guides recognise that personal assessments (e.g., 'pleasant') can be used to overlay objects with potentially engaging personal assessments (not possible solely through the relay of factual information).</li> <li>• Audiences perform the role of active listener, in this case angling heads, and looking quietly towards the area of the room, seeming to take in that this is a 'pleasant' spot.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide uses a personal assessment to aid audience in imagining room as it would have been, making tour engaging and informative.</li> <li>• Guide points out the area of the room where coffee was taken, demarcating it from the rest of the room.</li> <li>• Guide uses slow, steady talk which serves to delineate this section of subjective talk from the more factual talk.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience responds to guide's comment and pauses by remaining quiet and looking into morning room area.</li> <li>• The audience looks quietly at the object, appearing contemplative.</li> </ul>



